

# Preparing Students for Iso-Immersion: Activities about Cultural Norms to Improve Speaking Skills

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*This article explores an innovative, experiential-learning based approach to enhance the speaking skills of students and raise their cultural awareness during Isolation Immersion (Iso-Immersion). The focus lies in designing and implementing real-life scenarios that aim to cultivate a better understanding of diverse cultural traditions and improve their ability to communicate effectively.*

**Keywords:** *Real-Life Scenarios, Immersions, Cultural Norms, Speaking Skills*

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## INTRODUCTION

Iso-immersion (i.e., Isolation Immersion activities held at Fort Ord) at the Defense Language Institute Foreign Language Center (DLIFLC) offers students a two-day crash course to develop their intercultural competence and knowledge of the target culture. In Iso-immersion, students are immersed in an environment in which they speak the target language as they experience challenging situations through real-life scenarios. This teaching method is different from traditional language teaching methods, which often fall short in adequately preparing students for realistic experiences, particularly in grasping the intricacies of various cultural norms. This article focuses on how to create and conduct real-life activities to bolster students' speaking skills and increase their cultural awareness through activities at the Institute's immersion facility. The scenario is based on experiential learning, where students engage in an activity and then de-brief to highlight learning and discuss any questions/challenges.

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## SCENARIO OBJECTIVES

Real-life scenarios not only allow language teachers to practice linguistic functions but also prepare students to successfully perform a military task by enhancing cultural competence with Higher Order Thinking Skills (HOTS) as listed below:

- Participate in work-related conversations
- Recognize cultural differences and similarities
- Develop argumentation and persuasion skills
- Deal with unpredictable transactions or situations
- Analyze information and behavior
- Create and justify an action plan
- Develop interpersonal skills (rapport building, relationship building)
- Acquire and demonstrate the general ability to adapt to different situations

The objectives of the scenario described below is to expose students to one type of Hispanic culture through situations that students may encounter during their Outside Continental U.S. Immersion (OCONUS) with the local inhabitants of the target country, and provide them the opportunity to practice the following linguistic functions:

- Ask and answer open-ended questions
- Provide an explanation
- Give instructions/directions
- Give a description
- Perform a transaction
- Report an event

The scenario will help the students, in the 1+/2 level of speaking proficiency, gain cultural awareness and sensitivity, develop problem-solving skills, and increase their speaking fluency and confidence. These types of Iso-Immersion activities are conducted with students at this proficiency level for two key reasons: (1) they can become broadly aware of these concepts early on so that they can notice them throughout the program; (2) they can begin developing OPI-related linguistic skills (e.g., discuss abstract topics, persuade others, etc.) and culturally-based information while covering Semester II topics. Students will also practice many formal and informal linguistic features, such as relevant verb tenses and key vocabulary. An added benefit will be increased student motivation through realistic cultural experiences.

The following sample scenario is one of three scenarios that students role played with the “local inhabitants”/teachers. During the total Iso-Immersion time, each student will participate in each of the three scenarios.

## **SAMPLE SCENARIO**

The Iso-Immersion scenarios described in this article take place during Semester II. Students are told they are members of a commission tasked with surveying the crops in an area of the Andes in Bolivia, where the population is mostly indigenous and deeply traditional. The inhabitants of this region are highly committed to environmental conservation and the preservation of their ancestral traditions, including the consumption of coca leaves. Part of the mission is to engage with the local inhabitants to convince them that the U.S. intends to help eradicate illegal coca cultivation and replace it with crops that will provide the people from that region with greater long-term benefits (i.e., soybeans, corn, potatoes, and fruits). Students will meet a local leader to find out their customs and traditions, with the goal of building better rapport to be able to persuade them. All interactions are to take place in Spanish.

### **Information for Teachers**

The teacher plays the role of a local leader representing indigenous communities, where traditions are highly valued, and the consumption of coca is considered important in providing a connection with nature. Prior to the activity, teachers receive detailed guidelines on how to respond to various types of potential student communication (e.g., if the student is overly direct or pushy) and on how to determine if they should allow the student to persuade them to change their crops. The teacher/local leader should begin by reporting that the community is unwilling to give up coca cultivation. The teacher/local leader further states that in their opinion, Americans consume too much cocaine and do not sufficiently respect nature. Plants should be used for good purposes, not for creating drugs. The teacher/local leader will argue that instead of asking their village to change their crops, the Americans should reduce their addiction to cocaine.

The scenario set in the Andes of Bolivia provides a unique platform for students to engage in cross-cultural communication and exercise HOTS through analyzing, negotiating, persuading, and justifying their proposed agricultural changes. Their encounter with the local leader (a.k.a. teacher) offers the opportunity for them to navigate through cultural nuances and articulate the benefits of their mission. This scenario not only cultivates linguistic skills but also enhances cultural competence by placing students in a context where cultural understanding plays a key role. The interplay between cultural sensitivity and HOTS is a significant aspect of the scenario, fostering a holistic development of foreign language fluency and problem-solving skills in an unexpected situation.

## **GUIDELINES**

Students are given homework the day before the Iso-immersion so that they can become familiar with the topic. The homework entails readings (i.e., Characteristics of Culture) and watching news articles and videos related to three specific scenarios. Students also review necessary vocabulary and useful grammatical structures related to persuasion and also showing respect. They also are

given the definition and rubric of cultural characteristics and cultural competence so that they know how they will be assessed.

## **Part I**

The activities start at 8:30am. During the first 15 minutes of the first hour, the teacher will divide the class into three groups of three students per group, explain their roles in the scenarios, and answer questions they might have about the homework and the rotations through different stations. Then, each group will decide the order in which each group member will lead, support, or observe during their visit to each station. Group members will review all three scenarios to plan for their meeting with the local inhabitants/teachers. Students are told general guidelines to consider cultural appropriateness of their communication along with their behavior and body language. They are told to make a plan together on how they will approach the first scenario, keeping in mind that they can revise their communication as needed for scenarios two and three.

## **Planning**

During the first hour, after they have formed their groups, the students will designate their alternating roles for each station, which is important because students will be allowed to choose the scenario and the theme they would like to observe or lead when interacting with the local inhabitants/teachers.

At each station one student will lead while a second student will be the leader's partner to provide support and a third student will observe the pair's performance at that station. The observer will take notes on the "Debrief Form" (see Figure 1) and will keep track of time. It is recommended that a two-minute warning be given before the time is up (see Figure 2 for timings). The observer will not interact with the rest of his group members or the local inhabitants/teachers. She/He will pay attention to the linguistic and cultural competence of their group. Later, the observer will lead the debrief for five minutes and ask group members to self-reflect.

**Figure 1**

*Debrief Form for Students, to be Completed by the Student in the Observer Role*

	<b>Station 1/Scenario 1</b> <b>Leader:</b> <b>Observer:</b>	<b>Station 2/Scenario 2</b> <b>Leader:</b> <b>Observer:</b>	<b>Station 3/Scenario 3</b> <b>Leader:</b> <b>Observer:</b>
<b>Lexical and structural control:</b> (Proper use of vocabulary, verb tenses, and expressions)			
<b>Cultural appropriateness:</b> (Awareness and command of common cultural and social norms)			
<b>Cultural Characteristics identified:</b> (Power distance, Individualism vs. Collectivism, etc.)			
<b>Communication skills applied:</b> (Verbals/non-verbals, greetings, gestures, turn-taking.)			
<b>Did the speaker accomplish the objective set by the group?</b>			
<b>What recommendations do you have for the group for the next station?</b>			

## Part 2

Part 2 runs from 9:30am to 11:45am. The students will interact with the local leaders (preferably teachers from other teaching teams). This is when students obtain the greatest benefits through role play situations in that they will:

- build speaking confidence.
- learn to express themselves and understand responses, fostering communication skills crucial for fluency.
- practice vocabulary and grammar structures in a natural, conversational context, which facilitates vocabulary expansion and syntactic accuracy.
- have the opportunity to correct any errors they notice, and the observer can note errors for each student to reflect on after the activity.

Interacting with a native speaker in a role-play offers a dynamic and authentic approach for students in the development of their foreign language speaking abilities, integrating language skills with cultural understanding in practical, real-life scenarios.

### Part 2 Logistics

- Students stay 30 minutes at each of the three stations (country).
- Students take an active role in asking questions and making conversation.
- Students carefully observe the local leader for cultural characteristics (e.g., eye contact, body language, preferred communication style) and modify their communication as appropriate.
- Teachers allow students to take an active role and let them ask questions. When a teacher needs to ask questions, they will be open-ended.

Teachers can organize the groups and rotations as in Figure 2.

**Figure 2**

*Rotations of Groups for Part 2 of the Activity*

Time	Group 1	Group 2	Group 3
9:30–9:55	Station 1 Scenario 1	Station 2 Scenario 2	Station 3 Scenario 3
9:55–10:00	Debrief	Debrief	Debrief
10:00–10:25	Station 2 Scenario 2	Station 3 Scenario 3	Station 1 Scenario 1
10:25–10:30	Debrief	Debrief	Debrief
10:30–10:40	Break	Break	Break
10:40–11:05	Station 3 Scenario 3	Station 1 Scenario 1	Station 2 Scenario 2
11:05–11:10	Debrief	Debrief	Debrief
11:10–11:45	Entire Class Debrief & Feedback, including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• cultural characteristics identified and how the U.S. culture is similar to and different from other cultures (individualistic vs. collectivistic)</li> <li>• power distance characteristics identified and how the U.S. culture is similar to and different from other cultures in terms of going through local leaders or being able to make decisions on a more local basis</li> </ul>		
	Lunch Break		

### Part 3

Part 3 runs from 1:00pm to 1:50pm. After visiting all stations, all groups will gather to discuss their learning experiences. During the first 10 minutes, each group will prepare a final 10-minute debrief for the rest of the class in which they will discuss the linguistic and cultural challenges they encountered at each station and how these challenges were overcome. After all groups have presented their debriefs and feedback, they will take a 10-minute break.

### Part 4

From 2:00pm to 3:00pm, the class will split into small groups or pairs to prepare a 10-minute presentation (in the target language) for their commanding officer about the meetings they held with the local population. This final briefing activity aims to simulate a scenario in which students will analyze the benefits of the information obtained, propose strategic action plans, and finally, present their findings to their commanding officer to show their understanding of the language and culture. The final briefing will focus on justifying the proposed action plan. This activity holds importance in the development of foreign language speaking skills for several reasons:

- The small group/pair activity encourages students to engage in meaningful conversations about analyzing information and cultural aspects, creating an action plan, and justifying the proposed action plan. This conversational activity allows students to practice HOTS to improve fluency and articulation in the foreign language.
- Through discussions about cultural norms, the students can use diverse vocabulary related to traditions, behaviors, and values, which may help broaden their lexicon and enhance their ability to express complex ideas in the target language.
- Students apply their language skills in a practical setting. They practice listening, speaking, and comprehension in real conversations about cultural aspects, honing their language proficiency.
- Exploring and discussing cultural nuances in a foreign language helps students understand the language in its cultural context.
- Analyzing and comparing cultural norms in various countries develops language skills and fosters the ability to communicate effectively in diverse cultural environments. This skill is invaluable in a globalized world where effective cross-cultural communication is crucial.

## **GUIDELINES FOR THE BRIEFING**

### **Introduction and Planning (5 minutes)**

The teacher divides the participants into small groups or pairs, ensuring each group has a clear understanding of their task. Guidelines for the teachers to lead this briefing follow.

### **Group Analysis and Action Plan Formulation (15 minutes)**

- Instruct each group to analyze the information and/or skills obtained during the activity, identifying key benefits and challenges.
- For groups that did not accomplish the goal set by the group at any of the stations, have them formulate an action plan including what went well and what they would do differently given the opportunity.
- Allocate time for each group or pair to prepare a concise five-minute briefing presentation (see guidelines below).
- Emphasize the importance of clearly justifying their proposed action plan, linking it to the information and experience obtained in the previous scenarios.

### **Briefing Presentations (25 minutes)**

- Each group or pair delivers a five-minute briefing to the military commanding officer.
- The presentations will cover the identified benefits, proposed action plans, and the rationale behind each recommendation.



### **Q&A and Feedback Session (5 minutes)**

- Open the floor for questions and feedback from the military commanding officer.
- Encourage thoughtful discussion and clarification on any aspects of the action plans.
- Provide constructive feedback on the presentations, highlighting strengths and areas for improvement.

The immersion will conclude by highlighting the importance of understanding and appreciating cultural diversity and its role in effective communication and understanding in a global context. This activity is instrumental in enhancing students' foreign language speaking skills by providing an authentic context for conversation, using mid and low frequency vocabulary, and fostering an understanding of language within a cultural framework.

### **LEARNING OUTCOMES AND CONCLUSION**

Upon completing this task-based activity, students will have had the opportunity to further develop their language proficiency and cultural competency. The goal is for them to develop their ability to engage effectively with a local population in authentic cultural contexts, employing appropriate linguistic strategies and demonstrating sensitivity to cultural nuances. Furthermore, students will have continued to practice their intercultural communication skills and developed a heightened awareness of cultural differences, being able to apply this knowledge to navigate through intercultural interactions with confidence and respect. We recognize that cultural awareness is integral to effective language learning. These scenarios can play a strong role in their journey toward becoming culturally competent and proficient language learners.